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ABSTRACT

Alternative schools are defined in this report as schools or programs targeting students who are unsuccessful in the traditional school environment. These schools often see their mission as one of dropout prevention. Certain features are usually associated with alternative schools, including a clear mission, a small enrollment, a more personal relationship between students and teachers, clear rules, high standards, and a flexible schedule. A number of challenges to alternative schools is explored, and some specific practical recommendations are offered for implementing an alternative school program. A "sampler" provides profiles of nine alternative schools in the Northwest region, some urban and some rural. (SLD)

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BY REQUEST...

ALTERNATIVE SCHOOLS: APPROACHES FOR STUDENTS AT RISK

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FOREWORD

This booklet is the fifth in a series of "hot topic" reports produced by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. These reports briefly address current educational concerns and issues as indicated by requests for information that come to the Laboratory from the Northwest region and beyond. Each booklet contains an explanation of the topic's importance, a sampling of how Northwest schools are addressing the issue, suggestions for adapting these ideas to schools, selected references, and contact information.

One objective of the series is to foster a sense of community and connection among educators. Another objective is to increase awareness of current education-related themes and concerns. Each booklet will give practitioners a glimpse of how fellow educators are addressing issues, overcoming obstacles, and attaining success in certain areas. The series' goal is to give educators current, reliable, and useful information on topics that are important to them.

Other titles in the series include:

- *Service Learning in the Northwest Region*
- *Tutoring: Strategies for Successful Learning*
- *Scheduling Alternatives: Options for Student Success*
- *Grade Configuration: Who Goes Where?*

Introduction

Rural or urban, rich or poor, culturally diverse or homogeneous, all public schools and districts face the challenge of trying to educate students who for one reason or another don't thrive in the usual school environment. School psychologists or counselors may be called in to evaluate the situation, conferences with the parents sought, behavior management contracts drawn up, all to no avail—the student is at risk of failing. With many other options exhausted, this is a common scenario under which the school, parents, or students themselves may seek placement in an alternative school.

Alternative school is a term with many definitions in today's education literature. Some definitions are broad: "About all that alternative schools have in common is that their programs are somehow different from the curriculum followed by the large majority of the community's students," (Gold & Mann, 1984) or "[A]n alternative school simply is a school accessible by choice, not assignment" (Gold & Mann, 1984 quoting Daniel Duke, 1978). Alternative schools in a broad sense are an integral part of the way the education system has evolved in the United States: "Early in our history we recognized that the needs of a few often mirror the needs of the many. From the establishment of Harvard College in 1636 [originally intended for the education of Puritan ministers] to the magnet schools of today, American education is the collective result of countless alternative school programs" (Garrison, 1987). In our very diverse society, having numerous alternatives appears to be essential to the health of our education system.

For the purpose of this booklet, the term alternative school is used in a more narrow way to denote schools or programs targeting students who are unsuccessful in the traditional school

environment (Knutson, 1995-96, and *Education Week Glossary of Terms* on the Web). The schools discussed here often see their mission as dropout prevention. Their students may have been behind in credits, truant, exhibiting behavioral problems, pregnant or parenting, learning disabled, in the court system, homeless, having family problems, or experiencing other obstacles to learning. Though broader definitions of alternative schools often encompass magnet and charter schools, or voucher programs, it is not the intent of this booklet to examine these or other issues of school choice.

In one sense, the need for alternative schools reflects the success of the school system in enrolling a growing proportion of school-aged youth. "[M]any young people remain in school today who in the past would have 'adjusted' to the educational system by leaving it. . . . [L]aw and practice have recently made it more difficult for these young people to drop out when they want to; or for educators to exclude them when they want to. It has become more incumbent upon the public schools to educate all children as much as reasonably possible regardless of the mutual unsuitability of the students and mainstream conventional schooling" (Gold & Mann, 1984).

Benefits of Alternative Schools

Among the numerous advantages alternative schools may have for students, some of the major benefits commonly cited include the following:

- Reduction in drop out rates
- Reduction in student truancy
- Redirection of disruptive and inattentive students from mainstream institutions into more productive and successful learning environments
- Re-engagement with learning and the community that occurs when the students are placed in a more responsive and flexible environment

Characteristics of Successful Alternative Schools

Certain features associated with alternative schools for at-risk youth are mentioned repeatedly in the literature and in interviews. Successful schools usually have many of the following elements:

- A clear mission
- A smaller enrollment than that of mainstream schools
- A lower ratio of students to staff than in mainstream schools
- A more informal, personal relationship between teachers and students, and a family atmosphere
- A committed staff who counsel, mentor, and tutor the students
- Clear rules enforced fairly and consistently
- High standards for behavior, attendance, and performance along with an emphasis on individual accountability and responsibility
- A curriculum often described as "applied," "experiential," "hands-on," or "integrated," that makes connections between the disciplines and between the school and the community or the world of work
- Student voice in school operations
- A flexible schedule allows students to work at their own pace

Financial and Administrative Arrangements: Who, Where, How?

Among the alternative schools serving at-risk youth, there are differences in terms of location, funding sources, enrollment, relationship to mainstream schools in the district, and other issues. Some of these differences are not necessarily critical to the students or the outcomes of the schools. However, they may be important to administrators or others who are seeking to set up a school and are interested in the various structures or arrangements for doing so.

1. **Funding sources**
   Possible funding sources for alternative schools include the school district (either through direct funding of its own programs, per-student tuition paid to another entity such as an education service district or community-based organization, or a contract with another entity); federal, state, or foundation grants; and in-kind or cash donations from businesses and the community, including volunteer assistance. Some schools operate on combined funds from several sources. A school also may start up with funding from a source such as a federal or state grant, and then transition to district funding.

2. **Operators**
   Alternative schools in the public school arena are run by school districts, cooperatives of school districts, education service districts, nonprofit community-based organizations, and private contractors.

3. Location and affiliation

An alternative school may be affiliated with a mainstream school or district, or it may be accredited separately. It may be located on the same campus or in the same building as an affiliated mainstream school, or it may be housed at a separate school building or a nontraditional location such as a storefront, an office building, or a farmhouse. In the state of Idaho, none of the alternative schools are separately accredited and they can only operate in an existing school during different hours, or at an off-campus location during regular school hours.

4. Enrollment

Schools may target particular subgroups of students—pregnant or parenting, a particular ethnic or racial group, working students, older students, dropouts, or drug-involved students. Some states have rules about which types of students are eligible for alternative education. Successful schools usually have a referral and interview process that ensures they enroll students most likely to benefit from their program.

CHALLENGES

Even successful alternative schools may have trouble surviving long term. The following difficulties are mentioned in the literature and by those in the field:

1. **Inappropriate placements** (Glass, 1995; Black, 1997)
   One alternative school director identifies this as the beginning of the end for alternative programs (DeBlois, 1994). Providing appropriate options with limited resources is a continuing challenge for school districts, but an alternative school should not be considered an all-purpose solution for any student with any kind of problem. If the school or program becomes a dumping ground for students it was not intended to serve, it is likely that the once-enthusiastic staff will become frustrated and begin to leave the school. These teachers may then be replaced with others who do not share the original vision of the school, thus causing the program's reputation to suffer and enrollment to decline. The end result of such a scenario can be loss of funding and closure of the school.

2. **Lack of stable funding**
   While grants can be helpful in getting a school off the ground, applying for grants and doing other annual fund-raising activities is time consuming and tiresome (DeBlois, 1994). Once established, a school should strive to secure a place in the school district budget.

3. **Loss of charismatic leader**
   Some alternative schools are started by visionary directors who by sheer force of personality inspire the staff and students and attract community involvement. When the founder retires or moves to another job such a school may lose its momentum. To outlast its founders, a school must be based on

more than the charisma of one or two visionaries. While having a well-defined mission and a way of carrying it out, a school must also be able to change and grow in response to new ideas and people.

4. **Political and economic changes**
   Some schools may be forced to close when the political make up of a school board changes, teachers' unions oppose it (Amenta, 1997), or the economy takes a downturn (DeBlois, 1994).

Tips for Implementation

The following list details practical recommendations for establishing an alternative school or maintaining an existing one (DeBlois, 1994; Dugger & DesMoulin-Kherat, 1996; Harrington-Lueker, 1994):

1. **Define school goals.** Ideally, what will students accomplish? Some common goals for students include:
   - ◆ Master basic academic skills
   - ◆ Catch up on credits
   - ◆ Obtain a GED
   - ◆ Graduate from high school
   - ◆ Re-enter a mainstream school
   - ◆ Acquire employability skills
   - ◆ Learn job skills
   - ◆ Start on a career path
   - ◆ Stay drug and alcohol free
   - ◆ Become involved in the community

2. **Establish specific enrollment criteria.** Alternative schools typically require that students face one or more of the following obstacles to learning in a traditional setting:
   - ◆ Behind in credits
   - ◆ Behind in grade level
   - ◆ Pregnant or parenting
   - ◆ Dropped out of school
   - ◆ Suspended for truancy
   - ◆ Working hours not conducive to regular public school attendance

- Unable to function in a traditional school environment because of behavioral or other emotional difficulties

Like other schools, alternative schools usually have certain age and grade ranges outside of which they will not accept students. In addition, having a history of violence may disqualify a student from entry.

3. **Establish specific entry procedures.** These may include the following:
   - Obtain referrals and recommendations from family members and the counselor or principal of the student's former school. Sometimes students self-refer.
   - Assess the student for drug and alcohol use
   - Interview the student and sometimes family members to determine the student's willingness to work hard and abide by school policies
   - Test the student to determine academic level and other characteristics

4. **Hire staff who are committed to working with the specific group of students being served.** Training in areas such as experiential education, adult education, behavior management, and special needs is useful for alternative school teachers. It is important to involve staff and students in the hiring process.

5. **Select an appropriate location.** If the goal of the program is to have students re-enter a mainstream institution, then being located in or near that school can be advantageous. On the other hand, a separate location may help the school establish its own culture and identity. Students who dislike school

may feel more comfortable in a nontraditional setting such as a mall, a farmhouse, or an office building. Being near businesses and community organizations will be convenient for schools with a school-to-work or community service emphasis. The cost of the building and availability of funds will also be an issue in deciding location.

6. **If the school district is too small or lacks the financial resources to support an alternative school, look into participating in a regional program run by an education service district.**

7. **When possible, involve parents and family, particularly at the middle school level, through letters home, parenting classes, student-led parent conferences, and other parent involvement strategies.** In some schools, the majority of the students may be living independently of their parents.

8. **Connect with businesses and community groups for funds, involvement, and career-related opportunities.** They can take the following kinds of actions to support the school:
   - ◆ Donate cash
   - ◆ Donate in-kind goods and services—everything from baby clothes to computers to transportation for field trips
   - ◆ Serve on an advisory board
   - ◆ Tutor students
   - ◆ Speak to students about careers
   - ◆ Demonstrate trades and skills
   - ◆ Offer job shadowing, internship, apprenticeship, and career exploration opportunities

9. **Document and publicize your results through statistics, anecdotes, and personal testimony from students and parents.** The more support the school has from the outside community, the better off it will be. Make the community aware of the following kinds of information about your school:

- ◆ Graduation rate and number of graduates
- ◆ Percent and number of graduates employed
- ◆ Percent and number of graduates going on to further education and training
- ◆ Average salary several years after graduation
- ◆ Community projects students have participated in
- ◆ Positive changes students have made in their lives

TRENDS

What lies ahead for alternative schools? It appears there will be a growing number of alternative middle schools and perhaps even elementary schools. For example, until recently Idaho recognized only alternative high schools, but in 1996 began recognizing grades seven and eight as well. Compared to the high school student who attends an alternative school, there appears more potential for the middle school student to resume education in a mainstream (and usually less costly) high school.

Welfare reform may affect the population attending alternative schools though its impacts will vary from state to state. For instance, in order to receive welfare teenage parents will be required to live with their parents or under adult supervision. States will be authorized to require school attendance. School-age parents without a high school diploma or the equivalent will lose benefits if they do not attend school (Sullivan, 1997; Trotter, 1997).

Some alternative schools are reaching out to home schoolers. Many alternative schools already offer night school, summer school, and independent study; one school profiled in this booklet is developing online classes and tutorials for remote and homebound students of all ages. Another has the goal of becoming a community center.

Conclusion

School failure has well-documented ramifications in terms of lower lifetime earnings, higher unemployment rates, and higher societal costs (Ingersoll & LeBoeuf, 1997). Successful schools for at-risk youth not only boost achievement and graduate students, but send students into the world better prepared for employment, parenthood, community participation, and further education and training. In doing so they serve both the student and the community.

THE NORTHWEST SAMPLER

The following Northwest Sampler features nine alternative schools in the five Northwest states of Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, and Washington. Though they differ in funding arrangements, locations, services, grade spans, student age spans, and other aspects, they all have some of the characteristics generally recognized as key to effective alternative education for at-risk youth. The newest was established in 1996, the oldest in 1977. Included for each site is location and contact information, a program description, and observed outcomes and keys to success as reported by the principal.

Location

AVAIL—Anchorage Vocational and Academic
Institute of Learning
425 C Street
Anchorage, AK 99501

Contact

Jim Taylor, Principal
Phone: 907/276-2557
Fax: 907/258-0527

Founded in 1991, AVAIL is located in two storefronts on the first floor of a parking garage in downtown Anchorage's largest shopping mall. It is run as a nonprofit corporation in partnership with the business community in Anchorage. The school has a GED program, but its primary emphasis is on personality development, parenting skills, life stabilization, and employability skills. The former executive director defines AVAIL as "more of a home than a school" for the many students who have severed ties between themselves and their parents.

Enrollment in AVAIL's open-entry, open-exit program is around 60 students at any one time, grades nine through 12. Students are teen mothers on welfare, long-term dropouts, homeless youth, and others. Ninety-seven percent of the students qualify for Title I and 60 percent meet the federal definition of homeless. Students enrolled during the 1995-96 school year were parents to a total of 30 babies.

AVAIL was started with a four-year business-school partnership grant from the U.S. departments of labor and education in response to the high number of teenage mothers and Alaska native dropouts in Anchorage, and to the complaints of the business community that students did not have the skills neces-

sary to hold a job. Since the grant ended the Anchorage school district has paid for materials and personnel, while local businesses have supported the program with in-kind assistance such as a discounted lease agreement, discounted rental rates for transportation, free printing, food, recreational activities, and many other products and services. Businesses in the mall employ some of the youths in the program.

Business people are often speakers at the school, talking to students about what it takes to survive in the work world and often relating the problems they encountered earlier in life. Agencies such as Planned Parenthood also make presentations to the students.

Each of AVAIL's three teachers has a case management load of 20 or more students—interacting with their employers, probation officers, and others. Students set up a contract every week for minimum attendance of four hours a day. Students punch in and out of the school; by doing so they earn leave days as they would on a job. If they don't meet their attendance requirements and run out of leave days they must make up the time that week or the next. On Friday the school has a town meeting at which time students fill out their contracts for the following week, do make-up work, make up missed hours, or take part in offsite physical/recreational activities such as bowling or skating (the school has no gym facilities).

Half of AVAIL's required courses are taught through computer software. Students are required to spend at least an hour a day using computer technology. The curriculum is determined by the individual needs of the student. A transcript is reviewed by the case manager and the student is placed according to his or her goals. If the student is a few credits short of the district requirements for graduation, a schedule of courses is drawn up that will allow the student to get a diploma. If a student is working to get the skills to attain a GED, the schedule is made

accordingly. Work-based skills and school-to-work transition are addressed in a pre-employment skills class.

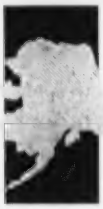
AVAIL is not accredited. Those students who do earn a high school diploma receive it from either the high school previously attended or the high school nearest to AVAIL.

Observed Outcomes

- The goal at AVAIL is not necessarily high school graduation. About 60 to 65 students out of 400 in the school's six-year history have graduated.
- About 40 percent of current students are employed.

Keys to Success

- Work with the community to define the need
- Convince the business community the school will be good for them
- Structure the school to meet the specific needs of the students
- Hire a staff with a vision
- Hire a staff willing to work above and beyond any standard job descriptions



Location

Mat-Su Alternative School
1775 West Parks Highway
Wasilla, AK 99654

Contact

Peter Burchell, Principal
Phone: 907/373-7775
Fax: 907/373-1430

Nationally recognized Mat-Su Alternative School (MSAS) has both a middle high program for students ages 13 to 16 (20 students, grades seven and eight) and a senior high program (150 students, grades nine through 12) for students 16 to 21. Located in a rural area 45 minutes north of Anchorage, MSAS serves teen parents (34 percent), homeless youth, adjudicated youth (23 percent), and others who have dropped out and are behind in credits for their age. Almost one-third of the students do not live with their biological parents. An important feature of the school is that it is not required to accept referrals from the mainstream schools. Students attend by choice. The school operates year-round and is open from 7:00 a.m. to 9:30 p.m. to accommodate work schedules.

MSAS provides its students with many services including a licensed day-care facility, a food bank, a clothing bank, and an AA support group. To provide for students' basic needs, the school networks with more than 59 local, state, and federal agencies. For instance, if the Alaska Department of Fish and Game finds road-kill moose they will call the director of the school who will arrange for students to butcher and freeze the meat. This arrangement not only helps to supply the food bank but gives students an opportunity to learn skills.

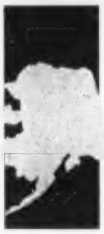
Beyond basic needs, MSAS stresses responsibility and accountability, for which students are rewarded and recognized. Students must attend school for a minimum of three consecutive hours a day on MSAS's closed campus. If students miss school for any reason they must make up missed time within the next two weeks. Students must keep a weekly planner containing daily, weekly, and long-term goals and schedules, and check in at least weekly with their advisor to discuss their progress.

Students attend small classes in separate classrooms and do general studies in a large room where tutoring is always available and there is one computer for every two students. Other learning options are self-directed studies, computerized coursework, and work-study. MSAS is also developing an online tutorial program for remote and homebound students of all ages.

The MSAS curriculum has a heavy school-to-work emphasis, all the more important because the school is located in an area with high seasonal unemployment. Students must meet district requirements and additional MSAS requirements in order to graduate. All students must complete a World of Work class that focuses on personal, job, and basic computer literacy skills. High school students must work at a job at least 15 hours a week and middle schoolers must do community service. Students must be able to keyboard at least 30 words per minute to graduate. Certain students must take life skills classes and teen parents must take both life skills and parenting classes.

MSAS students run their own credit union and an employment service which helps place students in jobs in the community and at school. They also participate in the day-care center.

The MSAS staff of 19 (including 10 teachers, a work-study specialist, and a full-time nurse) act as mentors, coaches, and friends to the students. Even the custodian spends half her time



training students to do custodial work. All teachers serve as advisors. They track attendance and call students who do not show up for school. Teachers spend the entire day, including lunchtime, with students.

Since opening in 1988, MSAS has received $4.8 million in grants, but now 90 percent of its funding is from the Mat-Su Borough School District. MSAS has helped 20 other schools set up similar programs and hosts an annual alternative schools conference.

Observed Outcomes

- 80 percent high school graduation rate
- 90 percent of students are employed one year after graduation
- Only a handful of graduates go to college each year, but of those who do, most make the dean's list

Keys to Success

- Set up a local advisory committee
- Put a strong emphasis on school-to-work transition and pre-employment skills
- Network with local businesses and agencies
- Establish a clear and limited mission and vision statement
- Hire staff who truly love kids and have a high capacity for rejection and failure

Location

Black Canyon Alternative School
315 South Johns
Emmett, ID 93617

Contact

James Heinz, Vice Principal
Phone: 208/365-5552
Fax: 208/365-5552

Emmett is a rural, farming community which is becoming less rural and more suburban as the city of Boise grows. Black Canyon Alternative School is a program of Emmett High School. The alternative school is located separately from the high school, but both serve all of Gem County, with some students coming from 40 miles away. The school also accepts students from outside the district. Founded in the mid 1980s, Black Canyon serves 75 students in grades nine through 12 in a day program and 25 in an evening program. In the 1996-97 school year, the program added 12 eighth-grade students to its program. In the 1997-98 school year, it will enroll 30 to 35 eighth-graders and possibly some seventh-graders identified as potentially at risk.

Students at Black Canyon may be behind in school, have behavioral problems, have learning disabilities, or have been previously home schooled. Only a small percent live with both biological parents. Most students do not want to return to the mainstream high school where they feel anonymous or unaccepted. However, some do: In the 1997-98 school year, 12 to 15 students will return to the regular school.

Black Canyon has four teachers, a counselor, and a half-time, state-funded person teaching careers and parenting. Students study one subject at a time for 70 class hours. Teachers act pri-

marily as tutors. Students are given materials and work at their own pace. Class sizes are smaller than at the regular high school, seldom more than 15 to 18; this is one of the things the students like about the school. Students have more open book tests and more chances to redo work than at the regular school. They sign in and out of school, but scheduling is somewhat flexible. For example, a student living independently and holding a job might come to school for half a day on a predetermined schedule. Students with less than 90 percent attendance during the time they are supposed to be at school lose credits.

Black Canyon students have a student government and opportunities to give input into school policies. For instance, students requested and the administration approved changing from three 10-minute breaks during the day to shorter breaks and a longer lunch period.

The junior high students at Black Canyon do not mix with the older students. At the request of parents, they are not allowed to go off campus at the lunch hour. They attend five out of seven periods at Black Canyon and take elective classes two blocks away at the junior high. The school involves parents or other family members in some of its disciplinary strategies. For example, as an alternative to suspending a student for behavior problems, the school will call in a family member who will sit with the student in all classes and ensure that the student stays on task. School officials report that the strategy seems to have a positive effect on the behavior of other students as well.

During the junior high program's first year the majority of students were referred for disciplinary reasons. Some had been expelled from numerous schools; most were at Black Canyon because it was their only alternative to expulsion from the local mainstream school. Next year a committee with representation from both Black Canyon and the mainstream school will select

a more balanced student population, focusing also on students with educational weaknesses.

In 1996-97, the one junior high teacher taught English, mathematics, social studies, and science. In 1997-98 the program will have two teachers and will be structured differently. Students will take a two-period block of math, a two-period block of language arts, and one period of behavioral studies focused on helping them find constructive ways to deal with peers, feelings, and other issues. They will also take two electives at the other junior high. It is felt that strengthening students' reading, writing, and mathematics skills will be the key to academic improvement in other subject areas. The intent of the junior high program is to send all students back to the mainstream high school once they have experienced some success at the alternative school.

Observed Outcome

- Though no students have gone to college in the past, in 1997 four out of the school's 12 graduates will go on to college. Of the others, two are going into the military, one is going to a trade school, and five are employed.

Keys to Success

- Hire teachers who are patient, tolerant, consistent, and humane
- Give students a voice in school policies

Location

Project CDA—Creating Dropout Alternatives
725 Hazel Avenue
Coeur d'Alene, ID 83814

Contact

Julie Green, Director
Phone: 208/667-7460
Fax: 208/765-2299

Project CDA includes a high school program established in 1979, with both a day and night session, and a separately housed middle school program established in 1991 as eighth grade only and expanded to include seventh grade in 1996. The administration hopes to add sixth grade to the program sometime in the future. Both programs are linked with conventional schools in the district but are located off-campus.

Students are referred to CDA by the mainstream schools for reasons such as high absenteeism, failing a grade, low grade point average, pregnant or parenting, or behavior problems. They go through an interview process that includes their parent(s) and counselor. High school students often self-refer. For both programs, CDA attempts to select a spectrum of students who will work well together, not including too many who are emotionally disturbed. At the high school level, CDA gives admission preference to those who are closest to graduation.

Upon entry to CDA, students review the expectations of the school and sign a contract that they will meet those expectations. Students are allowed three absences per quarter. If they exceed that number they must have a doctor's note or a paper showing they were required to appear in court that day. Parent notes are not accepted. Lateness counts as an absence for the day.

If the allowed number of absences is exceeded, students are dismissed from the program. Students are allowed to bankroll the absences from quarter to quarter.

CDA stresses the three Rs of respect, responsibility, and resiliency. School banners proclaim "Attitude is everything." The staff models the behavior they expect from students. For instance, the school does not use substitute teachers. Students see that a teacher's absence creates extra work for the others. There are no closed doors and no faculty lunch room or restroom at CDA; the staff is always with the students. Both students and staff go by first names. Students and the staff, including the custodian and the food service workers, all have votes in how the school is run. Students who have been with the program for two years are represented on the hiring committee along with staff. The director does not vote on hiring, wanting the staff and students to be as invested as possible in the new person's success.

Most CDA students feel they did not get enough attention at their previous school. At CDA each student has a mentor who follows that student's progress. After their first year, students attend CDA by invitation. They must have three staff recommendations to be invited back to the school.

The CDA curriculum is much more applied than that of the mainstream schools, with a heavy school-to-work emphasis. Students can earn credit for 150 hours of successful paid or volunteer work. The staff contacts employers once a month and visits the job site once a quarter. As noted above, the entire school attempts to model skills such as punctuality, attendance, and the positive attitude needed at a job.

To graduate, CDA high school students must earn the same number of credits in the same core areas as students at the mainstream high school. Some substitutions are made; for exam-

ple, a parenting class for parenting teens serves as a science credit. Teen parents work one hour a day in the high school's licensed day care center. In addition they study child development by writing case histories of children other than their own, choosing a child of a different age each quarter.

Because it is felt that the best chance for dramatic change is with the middle school population, staffing levels for them are highest: four full-time instructors and four instructional assistants for 48 students. The staff has found that at the middle school, because of differing developmental issues, homogeneous grouping of students at grade level is most effective. Students are heavily counseled and helped to build self-regard and experience success. They undergo training in team and trust building. At least every other month their parents must attend the school's monthly parent night for instruction in parenting skills.

Eighty percent of CDA middle school students resume their education at a mainstream high school.

Observed Outcomes

- The completion rate for CDA high school students is 91 percent. Failure to graduate is usually related to lack of attendance.
- In 1994, 92 percent of 1991 graduates were employed, with a mean annual salary $1,500 above the Idaho average.

Keys to Success

- Hire staff who are highly committed, flexible, and innovative, respect and like kids, and believe that kids are our future
- Keep administration out of hiring so that staff and students have ownership of and responsibility for these decisions and will be committed to the new person's success

Location

EAGLE High School
P.O. Box 1259
Columbia Falls, MT 59912
(school is located in Coram, MT)

Contact

Scott Gaiser, Principal
Phone: 406/387-5319
Fax: 406/892-6583

Established in 1990, EAGLE High School serves students in grades 9-12 who have fallen behind in credits, dropped out, or are not having success at the district's traditional high school. What began as little more than adolescent day care for students with drug problems has become a well-structured program that serves a diverse group, holds students accountable for their actions, and receives generally positive press in the community. The school's mission is to prepare students for adult daily living skills in an encouraging and safe environment. Initially, the goal for these students was re-entry into the local mainstream high school, but only two to four students a year have actually taken this route to graduation.

Students come to EAGLE through choice or by referral. The school enrolls about 60 students, with another five in an independent study program. To be placed on the waiting list, students must go through an interview process. Each student has a success plan detailing his or her goals in terms of the number and types of credits that need to be earned for graduation and a plan of action.

EAGLE has five teachers and a closed campus where students take four 1.5 hour classes a day in a low-key, family-type atmos-

phere. Teaching methods blend cooperative learning, small group counseling, tutoring, and computer-assisted instruction. Classes are taught in mixed-age groups of 12 to 21 students. The day begins with an advisory period during which teachers and students address issues affecting students, such as conflicts, AIDS, or a death in the family. During this time teachers also review the progress of those students who are in school on a contract basis because of a behavior problem.

Life skills, job-related competencies, vocational placement and experience, career education, self-esteem, conflict resolution, and decisionmaking are important components of the courses at EAGLE High School. In cooperation with the Montana Department of Labor and Industries' Jobs for Montana Graduates—a school-to-work program—EAGLE High School teaches 37 life- and work-related competencies. Each student has a spreadsheet with all the competencies, and different teachers sign off on these as the student attains them. Students can also earn up to two elective credits for hours worked.

School attendance at EAGLE is treated like going to a job. When students do not attend, they lose increments of their final grade just as they would lose pay at a job. The school's daily attendance rate is about 89 percent. The principal feels the attendance policy differentiates the school from a GED program; it makes a difference to employers and the military that the diploma is attendance based.

With the concentrated block schedule, a new quarter begins every 22 days. The principal finds this schedule reinforces accountability, breaks work into smaller, less intimidating pieces, allows students to see credits accumulate without waiting until the end of the semester, and gives students who have not done well another fresh start. EAGLE does not give any passing grades lower than a C.

Students unable to attend classes at EAGLE can earn a limited number of credits through independent study. These are often older students who are working or students who are planning to return to the mainstream high school at the semester and want to earn some credits in the mean time.

The school has opportunities for informal interactions between students and teachers such as talking in the halls during the mid-class breaks, playing volleyball together in the gym, and other activities. In surveys, EAGLE students cited having an adult advocate at the school as being of primary importance in helping them change their lives and achieve their goals.

For funding reasons, EAGLE was established as a separate school from Columbia Falls High School and is located in a rural, mountainous area outside the city limits. In terms of meeting accreditation standards, having the program affiliated would be simpler. However, having their own school with its own identity, school colors, co-curricular activities, and graduation ceremony gives students pride in the school. The principal's goal is to have the school grow to become a community learning center with night school and other services, eventually relocating in Columbia Falls.

Observed Outcome

- Of 22 1996 graduates, 19 could be located. Of those, 12 are employed and five are enrolled in some form of post-high school education.

Keys to Success

- Establish a clear attendance policy
- Establish a safe environment
- Set high standards—students will rise to them

- Use teachers with a variety of certifications for flexibility
- Hire teachers who know they can work with at-risk students
- Give students personal, one-to-one attention
- Forge a school identity separate from that of the traditional district high school

Location

PAL—Project for Alternative Learning
815 Front Street
Helena, MT 59601

Contact

Claudia Morley, Assistant Principal
Phone: 406/447-8880
Fax: 406/447-8908

Founded in 1977, PAL—Project for Alternative Learning, a program of Helena Public Schools, focuses on dropout prevention for grades 10 through 12. Freshmen students are not encouraged to apply until they have given high school a try and attempted a fresh start. The staff finds that older students seem more aware of their educational needs and the learning styles necessary for school success. Students from the two Helena high schools may self-refer to PAL or be referred by parents, teachers, and/or a counselor. PAL's selection committee reviews applications monthly and prioritizes them for acceptance; the committee looks at individuals but also considers gender balance, group dynamics, and other factors in making selections. Some PAL students continue with classes at their home high school, some reenter a mainstream high school later; the program is flexible. Most who enter remain in the program until graduation.

The program has eight staff members, some of whom teach at Helena High School as well, and 60 students. About 10 students at any one time are pregnant or transitioning into parenting. About one-third of the students are in an onsite therapeutic day treatment program to work through personal and emotional issues. A new interagency agreement is being negotiated with the Montana managed care mental health provider to manage

this program. It is likely that the new program will only be able to provide services to 12 such students.

PAL uses a positive peer culture model that stresses individual student accountability. Students can make recommendations on program policies and can serve on a peer review board to assist students who are having difficulties achieving success. All new students must take a three-week class called PAL 101 which introduces them to the philosophy, rules and requirements, rights and responsibilities, expectations, staff, and curriculum at PAL. A daily advisory period helps establish a positive relationship with a caring adult and to assist with transitions.

The PAL curriculum is structured around thematic units that are integrated across the disciplines using an experiential approach to learning. Some three-week thematic units have an outdoor education component which has attracted students who have failed in other programs. In fall 1997, the program is moving to a seven-period day in order to give staff a daily period for collaborative planning while still allowing students to take six classes.

There is no homework at PAL, making class attendance all the more important. If students have more than two absences from a class during a three-week block they will lose credit for that class. They must pass four classes during every three-week block to remain in good standing. Students are eligible for summer school if they have failed a course, but not if they have failed because of lack of attendance. Unlike some alternative schools, PAL has an open campus at the lunch hour.

Observed Outcomes

- 80 percent graduation rate for students admitted

- Of those who graduate, 50 percent go on to a four-year college or technical school

Keys to Success

- Give staff and students input into the school's policies and mission statement
- Hire staff that is tolerant, accepts diversity, flexible, and open
- Use hands-on experiential instructional strategies to deliver the curriculum
- Give staff regular time to plan the integrated curriculum

Location

Alpha High School
8678 N.E. Sumner
Portland, OR 97220

Contact

Tom Dearborn, Principal
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Alpha High School, established in 1980 and run by the Multnomah County Education Service District, serves 115 students from six school districts in the eastern part of the county. Using ESD funds, each district purchases slots for its students at Alpha. An advisory board made up of a representative from each district determines the student referral process and other procedures.

Alpha is based on the Experienced Based Career Education model initiated by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in 1972. Alpha focuses on academic training, positive self-development, school-to-work opportunities, and job readiness skills. Its goals for its students include earning a diploma, focusing on a career interest area, and being employed in that area upon graduation. Alpha's students are those who have been unsuccessful in traditional schools where their education does not seem to have as direct a connection with the outside world. They thrive once they are in a hands-on setting and can see how, for example, geometry is related to house building.

Students are involved in career planning throughout their time at Alpha. Each student has an individual occupation plan for career selection and all students spend half of every day at a job site. Early on they explore six different career pathways for two weeks each through activities such as job shadowing. Then they

select one of the areas they explored earlier for a more indepth six- to 13-week exploration called a learning level. As seniors, students spend the half day at a job site in their selected career area as a paid employee, intern, or apprentice.

Academic and work-based learning are deeply integrated in the Alpha curriculum. For instance, students complete two 13-week integrated learning projects each year. These projects are devised jointly by the student, employer, one of the student's classroom teachers, and another teacher, to reflect both school- and work-based learning. To demonstrate research and writing skills for an English class a student working at a transmission shop might investigate and write a report on OSHA requirements for that industry and what the shop has to do in order to comply with them. In addition, the student might do an oral report with visual aids.

In order to provide Alpha students with school-to-work opportunities the school-to-work liaison has recruited 260 business partners.

Alpha students meet the same standards and undergo the same testing as other Oregon high school students. They also participate in twice-yearly, student-led conferences; parents attend these, as well as anyone else the student would like to invite. At the conferences students typically show any projects they have completed, discuss their plans for the future, and explain what they must do to accomplish those plans.

In the 1997-98 school year, Alpha will pilot the use of a skills standards document, developed with a local community college, for beginning-level welding. As students working in this field progress, employers and teachers will sign off on the academic and workplace skills enumerated in the document. Next year the metals field will be one of the Certificate of Advanced Mastery

areas and students will able to participate in a metals program that articulates with a community college program.

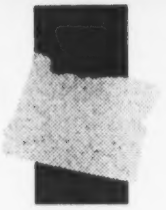
Alpha is structured around the goal of workplace readiness. Students must clock in and out of school and wear appropriate clothes to school and the job site. When they arrive at the job site they call in to a voice mail that records the time. If students have more than five unexcused absences in a nine-week period they are referred back to their original high school and must wait 90 days before they can return to Alpha. The school has a full-time person in charge of attendance and accountability.

Instruction at Alpha is individualized. Each teacher has only 15 students per semester. Working in a family-like atmosphere, students have input into their job sites and the curriculum. Until recently many of the staff at Alpha had been at the school many years, some from the time of its inception. In the 1996-97 school year many of the long-term staffers moved to other ESD alternative schools to disseminate their school-to-work expertise.

Alpha is temporarily sharing space with another alternative high school in Portland while a new building is constructed next to the light rail in downtown Gresham, a suburb of Portland. The building, which will be ready for the 1998-99 school year, is designed to be part of the community. It will have a demonstration area for Alpha's business partners to introduce students to various trades and a place for organizations to list community service projects in which they would like students to participate.

Observed Outcome

- Of 46 graduates in the 1996-97 school year, 23 are going on to community or four-year colleges and 23 are employed in their chosen career pathway.



KEYS TO SUCCESS

- Maintain a low student-teacher ratio
- Emphasize job readiness skills
- Establish school-business partnerships
- Set clear expectations and standards

Location

Portland YouthBuilders
5432 N. Albina Avenue
Portland, OR 97217

Contact

Jill Walters, Executive Director
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Established at the close of 1995, Portland YouthBuilders, which teaches students construction trade skills, is a private, nonprofit, community-based alternative school funded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Portland Public Schools dropout retrieval program.

By federal mandate, Portland YouthBuilders serves very low-income high school dropouts in an inner-city target area. Students are recruited through a broad effort that includes street outreach, newspaper ads, radio announcements, and networking with social service agencies. Students range in age from 16 to 24.

Portland YouthBuilders operates on a 10-month cycle, with rolling admissions during the first four months as openings occur. Enrollment is limited to 40; program staff total 13.5 FTE with eight of these in direct service positions. Though students earn high school credits for their work at Portland YouthBuilders, most of them are working toward a GED. Through an articulation agreement they also receive 19 college credits from Portland Community College.

Organized into four crews of 10, students spend alternating weeks in the classroom and on jobsites, building and restoring affordable housing in their community. The classroom curriculum

integrates academic concepts with work-based content; for example, instructors may use examples from carpentry to convey principles of geometry, or examine topics such as community development, housing needs, and architecture from an historical perspective.

Portland YouthBuilders is part of AmeriCorps, a national service program. Students spend half a day each week doing community service with a nonprofit agency chosen to match their skills and interests. For this they receive a $2,363 stipend to be used for college tuition or an approved school-to-work program.

After the 10 months of full-time services, students receive 12 months of follow-up support services. Participants are provided career counseling, vocational mentors, instruction in job readiness skills, individual counseling, case management, support groups, life skills workshops, alcohol and drug education, social and recreational activities, and referral to other community services.

As students progress through the program they are given opportunities to develop leadership skills and take responsibility for themselves, their families, the program, and the community. For example, program policy is determined by a committee of eight students and two staff members.

Portland YouthBuilders sets skills standards that are equal to those of employers in the construction industry. Students sign a rights and responsibilities contract on entry to the program. While minor infractions are addressed on an individual contract basis, serious infractions including poor attendance, intoxication, or bringing weapons to school result in dismissal. The program is alcohol and drug free; participants must undergo random urinalysis.

Portland YouthBuilders tracks student progress extensively, performing educational tests, and inventorying attainment of job skills, life skills, and construction skills. Counselors also track the personal goals students set for themselves at the outset of the program.

Observed Outcomes

- The program is too new to show many outcomes. Based on the outcomes achieved by YouthBuilder programs in other cities over the last 20 years, the Portland program has set the following goals:
  1) 75 percent of graduates will be enrolled in college or placed in career-oriented employment
  2) Graduates will still be in school or employed 12 months after graduation
  3) After the 10 months in the program 60 percent of program participants will obtain a GED or high school diploma or increase their skills by three grade levels
  4) After 10 months in the program and 12 months of follow-up services 70 percent of program participants will have a GED or high school diploma

Keys to Success

- Give students opportunities for leadership; involve them in decisionmaking and setting policy
- Set high standards and expectations of behavior and performance—don't coddle students
- Tie academic work to work experience
- Maintain low student-teacher ratio; give students individual attention

Location

Tonasket Alternative High School
35 Highway 20 East
Tonasket, WA 98855

Contact

Andy Jones, Teacher
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Rural Tonasket School District serves a geographic area larger than the state of Rhode Island. Some of its students travel an hour-and-a-half to school. Tonasket Alternative High School, located in a separate building, is a program of the district's middle high school of 600 students. Established in 1996, the alternative school came about as an outgrowth of several community goal-setting processes and a community development process guided by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. The school superintendent, teachers, counselors, and residents of this rural area were concerned about a large population of disenfranchised teenage students. As well, a substantial number of home schooling parents wanted their teenagers to move into a school situation for both social and academic reasons and were interested in finding an alternative to the mainstream school.

In 1993, the district passed a bond for construction of a new middle-high school, freeing up a building for the alternative school. The school was started with a grant from the state's Office of Public Instruction and is now maintained with district funds. The staff consists of one full-time teacher, three part-time instructional aides, and many community volunteers.

Like the Tonasket community the student body of the alternative school is diverse. The approximately 30 students range in age

from 13 to 19. Some are very competent, college-bound students, some are below grade level, and some are reluctant learners. All applications are processed through the school counselor and come about by the choice of the student. If the high school wants to refer a student with behavioral problems the student is required to maintain four to six weeks of acceptable behavior to demonstrate that he or she is motivated to attend the alternative program.

The alternative school instructional strategies and curriculum stress an active, hands-on approach, some direct instruction, and a reliance on community resources. Much of the curriculum integrates the subject areas. Some students earn credit through a contract-based independent study program. For instance, a student might earn language arts credit for being in a community play or building an engine at home, if he or she can describe in writing what was done and what was learned from the experience.

The staff tracks student progress by recording time on task in a computer chart, recording products in a grade book, and maintaining a star chart for skills students are expected to master, such as learning to touch type, using certain computer applications, and writing a resume. Quarterly report cards have both grades and teacher comments. Students in the alternative program earn a Tonasket High School diploma.

The staff at Tonasket Alternative High School strives to create a feeling of family identity and community. Students are supported with group discussions and individual counseling. They contribute to the sense of community by helping to structure the program and maintain the school building. At the beginning of the year they developed their own rules and codes of behavior. They and the staff clean the floors and rugs. Students have helped build school furniture and worked on landscaping.

Observed Outcomes

- Student attendance is good
- The program grew—from nine students in September 1996 to 34 in June 1997
- The students have matured, gained social and other skills, have better self-image and more self-confidence

Keys to Success

- Gather community support
- Expect a certain level of maturity; keep expectations high
- Hire staff who love working with teenagers

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